Synopsis

PhD English

"Fiesta Feminina": Blurring the Boundaries of Gender in Select Feminist Fairy Tales

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"Women are not the victims of some mysterious fate: our ovaries do not condemn us to a lifetime of submission"

Simone de Beauvoir

The feminist fairy tale genre as a scholastic tool interrogated the misogynistic way women were shackled as prisoner of gender roles and affirmed that women ought to have the power to liberate themselves and substantiate their mettle by asserting their identity in society. The recurring motif of the male authored fairy tale texts which undermined women's concerns and echoed that "literature was not the business of a woman's life" was contested by gynocritics. Helene Cixous' '*ecriture feminine,'* Judith Butler's 'gender performativity,' Betty Frieden's 'The Feminine Mystique,' Sarah Grand's 'New Woman' theory, Kimberle Crenshaw's 'intersectionality,' Andrea O Reilly's matricentric feminism, Naomi Wolf's 'The Beauty Myth' and other related readings and theorising by feminist writers and critics across cultures gave new impetus to women's writing and gender studies as women writers struggled with gender inequity and restrictions on the content and style of their writing. The critique of male authors' that women's writing was imitative and that it did not satisfy the predetermined standards for writers were challenged by gynocritics and women writers across the globe.

Feminist fairy tale writers did not voice feminist concerns to overthrow male authored texts. They deconstructed the fairy tale canon by inverting fairy tales to prove that female protagonists and fairy tale plots victimised women and depicted men as oppressors and women as oppressed. The texts pointed out that fairy tales were gendered and children's literature ought to be emancipated. The texts portrayed the presentation of women as passive and docile in a patriarchal set up. The feminist fairy tales refrained

from depicting women as “the second sex” and portrayed strong, active, bold, courageous, and intellectual women. The select texts, namely *The Moon Ribbon and Other Tales*, *The Bloody Chamber*, *Feminist Fables*, *Her Stories*, *Kissing the Witch* and *Sweeping Beauties* emphasised gender parity and expatiated on the theme of ‘beyond gender.’ This positive transformation that took place in contesting women’s roles in the canonical texts as docile, weak, passive, awaiting a male rescuer was demythologised. The 'New Woman' image articulating a well-controlled determination to overcome the historical, cultural and mythical hurdles to portray women as individuals ‘beyond being’ was ascribed as biological species is redefined in the study.

The study depicts how fairy tales, an uncritiqued part and parcel of popular imagination, passed on from one generation to another in oral and written form, and innocuously ingested the covert politics and ideologies of gender. This gendered politics, fed from childhood, just like mother’s milk, seeped into humanity, to in turn shape the socio-cultural gendered norms of society. To bring in change to such established norms, a constructive criticism of the root cause was ascertained. This paved the way for the emergence of the Feminist Fairy Tale genre that subverts the archaic fairy tales. The present study questions the gender tropes in place of traditional fairy tales by holding a mirror to gender as a construct through the reconstruction of the female protagonist and the deconstruction of the male protagonist. It envisages the toppling of existing gender dynamics by addressing power relations between the sexes.

The criticism on the select tales in the feminist fairy tale genre based on the contextualization of gender in varied aspects of feminist reworkings focus on individual texts, plots and characters. This study attempts to bring in an exhaustive comparative analysis of feminist writers across cultures with reference to the theme of ‘gender’ and ‘beyond gender.’ The need to present the difference in portrayal of the new woman in

fairy tale and feminist fairy tale scholarship, to reconsider the altruism in the tales is presented in a new light. The need to redefine the blurring of gender boundaries is addressed thereby envisioning realms of gender parity. The reworkings reiterate the need to end gender dominance in the literary texts by subverting character, plot and narration in life and literature. The present thesis addresses this research gap.

Though space and time were the major obstacles for women writers, the feminist fairy tale authors deconstructed the European canon of fairy tales as part of children's literature. These traditional tales, which echo cultural norms and shared beliefs about traditional gender roles by reflecting the patriarchal values crafted by society were subverted in feminist fairy tale texts to invert gender stereotypes, gender roles, gendered myths and the depiction of women as passive heroines waiting to be rescued by male protagonists The rationale for the selection of this topic is that it challenges the objectification of women in fairy tales through the reworked genre. "Fiesta Feminina" celebrates the innate strength of women, who are revisioned in feminist post-cultural thought to blur boundaries of gender through the prism of the Feminist Fairy Tale genre.

The study asserts that the works of the select authors of the Feminist Fairy Tale genre are not popular in Children's literature and therefore need to be studied. The select feminist fairy tales were not discoursed as a subject of debate in the ambit of comparative studies in the academia. Addressing similar concerns of authors across cultures with respect to feminist and gender studies, the select tales in the genre expounds that women's struggles are universal. The texts assert that the inequalities of gender as not preordained, but socially constructed by cultural structures to redefine feminist rewritings as non-sexist literature. All the select authors are postmodern feminist fairy tale authors who combat the prejudices of sexism, racism and homophobia. They address gender polarisation in the patriarchal social order, combine ethical sensibility and didactism to

rework sexual violence, present the psychodynamics of female creativity and rework disparities of social power structures to deconstruct the traditional fairy tale genre. The select texts celebrate women by breaking gender archetypes and stereotypes.

The select texts represent the voices of writers from differing geographies and cultures. Jane Yolen is American, Angela Carter is British, Virginia Hamilton is Afro-American, Suniti Namjoshi is Indian, Emma Donoghue is Irish Canadian, The Fairy tales for Feminists is an Irish collective comprising of Elaine Crowley, Cathleen O Neil, Gerardine Meaney, Mave Kelley, Roz Cowman, Grainne Healey, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Margaretta D' Arcy, Clodagh Corcoran and Rita Kelly. The similar gender issues in a patriarchal set up addressed in all the select texts are comprehended as the writers are juxtaposed in a similar manner to rework and resurrect female protagonists from fairy tales and legends across cultures to discourse on similar gender concerns in varied ways. The select texts are inversions of the canonical fairy tales of Hans Andersen, Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers. Feminist fairy tales, authored by gynocritics across cultures redefine the canonical fairy tale genre through inversion .The select texts subvert plots and protagonists in the texts to celebrate women and gender through women's tradition, women's canon and women's lineage to present the intersection of feminism and feminist reworkings.

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Thesis Statement

This study focuses on how the genre of Feminist Fairy Tale uses the template of gender as a prism of analysis to showcase the inversion of gender constructs by interrogating and subverting the socio-cultural frameworks imposed on women to blur the boundaries of gender.

Objectives

- To contextualise the subversion of gender and genre by reimagining and reassigning gender roles.
- To dismantle gendered norms through the interrogation of gender concepts, inversion of gender roles, and decolonisation of female sexuality to depose patriarchal dominance.
- To invert traditional texts to express how culture naturalises as normative certain hegemonic practices through powerful discourses.
- To address the dynamics of power and gender to redefine the construct called 'woman'.

Methodology

The select works of the Feminist Fairy Tale genre are chosen for close analysis and close reading. The textual analysis of the select texts is done through re-reading and deconstruction of gender in the select texts and comprehension of narratology in the light of feminist and gender theories.

The guidelines of the ninth edition MLA Handbook are followed. The theoretical perspectives are put in place to contextualise women and gender, power dynamics, bodies, motherhood, sexualities and feminist futures in the context of feminist fairy tale scholarship.

Chapterisation

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: Gender and Genre

Chapter III: "*Fiesta Feminina*": Women in Feminist Fairy Tales

Chapter IV: *Celebrando el genero*: Gender in Feminist Fairy Tales

Chapter V: A Genre beyond Gender

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Chapter I is the introductory chapter which presents an overview of women's studies, feminist ideologies, feminist and gender theories with reference to feminist fairy tales. It examines the fairy tale corpus, the patriarchal paradigms, and the gendered and sexual identities to address male hegemony. It discusses the emergence of the feminist fairy tales as the antithesis of the canonical fairy tales to crash the indoctrination of the genre as a repertoire of hegemonic ideology. The chapter introduces the texts and the writers taken up for study and underscores the need to debrief the "happily ever after" endings and interrogate the fallacy projected by Perrault, Grimm and Andersen from feminist and gendered standpoints.

Chapter II attempts to redefine women's issues and gender concerns in the select texts by looking into the intersection of gender and genre in the select feminist fairy tales which interrogates the male-controlled tyrannical expressions of patriarchy in the male authored texts. The study questions the socio-cultural literary aesthetics to liberate women entrapped in marriage and family politics. The characterisation breaks the myth of the self-sacrificing woman and shatters the beauty myth as in Kissing *the Witch* by Emma Donoghue, *Feminist Fables* by Suniti Namjoshi, *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter, *The Moon Ribbon* by Jane Yolen and Sweeping *Beauties* by the Fairy Tale Collective. The thesis depicts how children's literature can be redeemed by rooting out the coercion

of women in misogynist fairy tales. The feminist fairy tales taken up for study present new perspectives of upliftment of women through gendered pronouncements by sabotaging the fairy tale female identities. They chisel strong courageous 'sheroes', foster feminist solidarities and envisage universal sisterhood and feminist futures.

Chapter III rediscovers the new feminine ethos through the resistance of stereotypes presented in the select texts. It interrogates objectification of the female, bares the trope of male aggression and female victimisation as cultural erasure, and presents emancipation of women from domestic spaces through self-liberation or through a female rescuer archetype. The texts level out unequal gender norms through fantasy and magic. The study projects how the reworkings set up possibilities for radical cultural transformation of women as pictured in *The Moon Ribbon and other Tales, Sweeping Beauties, The Bloody Chamber, Kissing the Witch, Her Stories* and *Feminist Fables.*

Chapter IV elaborates the celebration of gender in the select works. Gender is presented as a contested terrain of masculinities, femininities and other genders. This underscores the need to overthrow sexist power and understand the cults of gender by deconstructing gendered identities. The need to embrace gender and gendered identities across the gender spectrum is highlighted. The male rescuer archetype is demythologised and female sexualities are decolonised. Gender politics is challenged as in the select tales, namely, *Feminist Fables*, *The Moon Ribbon and Other Tales*, *The Bloody Chamber*, *Kissing the Witch*, *Her Stories*, and *Sweeping Beauties*. The female protagonists rake the restrictions against male strictures and undergo a metamorphosis to achieve self-hood by overcoming despondency and negation in life. They assert the indomitable courage of the female protagonists to question man-woman relationships, marriage, love and sexuality to question gender dominance as they journey to emancipate themselves to attain self realisation and unleash their innate potential.

The protagonists celebrate the reconstruction of the self and the characters by occupying various loci in the gender spectrum and break traditional gender boundaries to transcend gender politics. They protest against the dehumanising tendencies of society by rejecting the masculine and feminine binaries and embrace the uniqueness of the self and thus endeavour to accept all genders. This depicts women's sense of self-worth in bringing about a positive social change.

Chapter V looks into the dismantling of gender and identity that questions sexist power structures in the select works by echoing a new didacticism of gender harmony and gender justice which is unbridled in the select texts. A celebration of 'beyond gender' and anatomising gender is evident in the role reversal of gendered stereotypes. The championing of the 'New Woman' who questions unto now unquestioned gender norms, the constant questioning of the 'feminine mystique,' the problematising of motherhood and maternity in the light of 'matricentric feminism' and the envisioning of a genderless world is presented through the characterisation of Mona, Sylva, Rose Child, Belle, Wolf Alice, Snow fight, and other daring female protagonists who are heroic, intrepid, audacious and resolute. That women adapting to the conformist image of femininity can never celebrate womanhood, is advocated. The study emphasises that the key to the trap of 'feminine mystique' is education and self-empowerment. The texts question the fairy tale canon and deliberate on gender parity and reimagine an egalitarian future for all genders. It discourses that women must move from the 'ethic of care' to 'ethic of justice'. All the protagonists deconstruct and reconstruct their worlds to break the myths of the binary of gender and envisage realms beyond gender through reintegration of humanity and blurring gender boundaries to envision harmonious, peaceful coexistence.

Chapter VI is the conclusion and a summation of the study. The thesis through the subverted texts attempts to narrow gender gaps and chart gendered outcomes to

discourse on the trauma of subjugation of women who battle issues like the stress of catamenia, birthing issues, postpartum depression and psychosis. It showcases the invisibility of women and their struggle to achieve selfhood by inviting all genders to break gendered social taboos to weave a tapestry of gender positive initiatives and works towards enlightening children and adults on mindfulness on gender. The texts replace the hegemonic aesthetics of the patriarchal paradigm of the sugarcoated tales to emancipate women from patriarchal myths and celebrate female identity, female sexuality, female strength and female empowerment. Feminist syndromes in dystopian literature and feminist dystopias critique gender as a clarion call towards re-envisioning the strength of all genders. The select tales invert the hegemonic aesthetics of the fairy-tale make-believe world of feminist fantasy by challenging the vision of the masochism of male-controlled tyranny. They enunciate the quintessential feminist enquiry about the sexist dynamics of the canonical tales. The feminist texts depicts that it is essential for scholars of fairy tale and feminist fairy tale scholarship to understand that gender is a choice and that life would be in jeopardy if one does not realise that all genders exist in an inclusive world where post genderism and technology have transported gendered identities to a genderless world.

Social relevance

The select feminist fairy tale texts chosen for study depict women as self-powered and self-empowered and are an inspiration to the young and adult alike. The women presented in the texts break the stereotypes and archetypes. The select texts discourse on gender identity and are gender lessons to boys' and girls', young and old. The binaries of gender are broken, and all gendered identities are appreciated in the select works. The texts critique the different concepts of gender presented in the fairy tale texts and the female protagonists break free of the limitations of the binaries of masculinity and

femininity to embrace all gendered identities. The themes of ‘New woman’, ‘the feminine mystique’, ‘matricentric feminism’ and intersectionality could be included in the school and college curriculum through these tales. Interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary studies could be introduced and character analysis and plot dissections could make learning of gender, more gender sensitive and gender empathetic. The texts conscientise children about the multidimensional roles played by women and all marginalised genders. These texts reiterate the need to understand the subjugation of women and the marginalised and sensitise readers and the society about gender equality and gender-neutral programming policies.

Scope for further research

- Theorising the body as expressed by a number of theorists including Virginia Woolf, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Susan Bordo, Helene Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir, Gayle Rubin, Donna Haraway, Sandra lee, Julia Kristeva and other feminists can be expatiated.
- Gender trouble and subversion in fairy tale films and feminist fairy tale films can be taken up for studies.
- Enrichment of the genre by incorporating feminist fairy tales of varied themes unto now unexplored using ‘technologies of gender ’can be studied.
- Didactic elements can be unleashed through philosophical perspectives through post humanist and post-feminist critique.
- The genre can be included in academic, scholastic and pedagogical realms and in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies.
- Further potential studies can be steered on socio-cultural studies.
- The post-colonial trauma of women’s subjugation in different fairy tales and feminist fairy tales across cultures can be studied.

- The study of womanism in African tales and the myths and legends of Indian fairy tales can be worked on.

Social outreach programmes and constructing the study as socially relevant through framing gender positive policies in academics and the social order can be initiated. Introducing gender lessons in disability studies, in blind schools, activities and as reading lessons for anganvadis, special schools and indigenous groups by using gender in women's studies is promising. Books and comics in children's literature, fairy tale and feminist fairy tale readings and activities in workshops, academic spaces and research could be championed. The study of feminist fairy tales may possibly celebrate women and gender in life and literature. The themes of gender and 'beyond gender' could be disseminated to society to familiarise measures and policies to empower all genders in the gender spectrum to envision a utopia of gender harmony and gender justice to reintegrate humanity.

The texts celebrate women and gender through the kaleidoscope of the Feminist Fairy Tale genre. The works of these writers attests that women ought to invent and reinvent themselves continually. The characters they encode present the biological, psychological, sociological, intellectual, cultural, emotional and maternal make-up of woman in particular and women in general, their struggles and success in the socialisation process. The tales reflect on the particular civilising process of their states in very specific ways and have one thing in common. They lay bare the contradictions of the civilizing process and reveal how power works in an arena where the impact of the socialisation of women need to be acknowledged and documented. Thus the present study attempts mediation between the extrinsic and intrinsic elements of gender in fairy tales and feminist fairy tales to interpret the literary genre and depict significant gender concerns of the select authors across culutres along the lines of feminist theories, feminist ethics,

feminist epistemology, feminist ontology and readings on gender theory. Thus the present study of feminist fairy tales celebrates women and gender in life and literature.

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